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A Serving Church: An Appraisal

JAMES CORKERY & STAF HELLEMANS*

We live in a time where people with regard to religion and church can easily take the exit-option. The Catholic Church, consequently, needs to convince people that when they strive for God and engage in the Church, they will get closer to living a more rewarding, 'universal' and 'eternal' life and that they will help in realizing the potential of humanity and of creation at large. That the Church is serving God, creation, humanity and individual people, is felt no longer to be self-evident.

With regard to a serving Church, an analytical distinction can be made between three dimensions: social and life-enhancing service, the crafting of felicitous conditions to enable service, religious service (in the strict sense). The three dimensions are, of course, linked. Moreover, the first type of services by Christians, say welcoming migrants or helping people to get their life going again, is also religiously inspired, yet performed in areas that are not considered religious in the first place. Adela Cortina's contribution aims at the first dimension. Peter Jonkers and William Barbieri tackle foremost the second dimension. We will comment mainly on the third dimension.

Social Arenas of Service

As a specialist in public ethics and in political philosophy, Adela Cortina looks at the potential of a serving Church and of serving Christians in the public sphere. Secularist thinkers often tend to question the legitimacy of religiously motivated public interventions. These convictions are regarded as particularistic and as endangering societal consensus on values and policies. The interesting point in

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the approach of Adela Cortina is that she reverses the argumentation. She states that the Christian comprehensive doctrine of the good, what she calls 'the ethics of the heart', is of vital importance for civil ethics, just because these maximalist Christian ethics go beyond the minimalist civil ethics. Minimalist civil ethics in themselves are bound to remain shallow without the ethics of the heart. Christianity, driven by the superabundant generosity of God, is thus called upon – like other movements with maximalist perspectives – to contribute to society and the good life of people. Abstaining from this call and withdrawing into its inner walls would not only mean a betrayal of God, but also signify a loss for the public good.

While Cortina exemplifies the need for Christianity in one particular arena, the public sphere, her basic argument, the overflowing of maximalist Christianity into the various provinces of private and public life, is also valid for other areas of life, for example in faith-based educational organizations or in informal help and assistance. How this overflowing is to be translated into suitable policies, how these actions by Christians in the different areas can best be performed and organized and how all this relates to other movements and perspectives are some of the follow-up issues that also need to be considered.

Felicitous Conditions for a Serving Church

The two other authors do not concentrate so much on a particular area in which the Church could be of service to the world. They rather analyze the preconditions that have to be met. They focus on the renewal of the Church that has to be accomplished in order for it to remain a serving Church in our time. Indeed, the Church has lost much of its former authority and persuasiveness and hence also much of its capability to change the world.

Peter Jonkers, a philosopher of religion, proposes to revive the tradition of practical wisdom. His starting point is not the outside world, but the polarizing trends within the Church and the ensuing disconnection between Church and faithful. Inner-church polariza-

tion is a consequence of the rise of pluralism in the late modern world – and of the inevitability of its translation into the ranks of the Church. To prevent endless conflicts and the danger of schisms, the Church, according to Jonkers, has to present itself and its basic belief tenets in another way than in – dividing and general – doctrinal statements. Since “in essence, being a Christian comes down to the *imitatio Christi*,” “it is... important that Christian faith makes the transition from its universalist principles to the concrete situations of human ways of life.” How the translation of this approach into the ranks of the Church might/should occur, what the status of these translations should be and whether they would not become, just as doctrinal statements, bones of contention, are some of the follow-up questions that come to mind.

The ethicist William Barbieri regards a self-emptying Church, guided by kenotic ethics, as an indispensable requirement today to overcome the disjunctions and “the crisis of moral credibility” of the Church. He stresses that kenosis harbors an ambiguity, that it contains twin faces: on the one hand, self-emptying and giving up power or privilege, on the other hand, the outpouring of love, fullness and service. As Barbieri makes clear, kenotic ethics and theology can easily be translated into ethical concerns on social issues (e.g. ecology, dialogue, non-violence). While there is no doubt in our minds that kenotic ethics and theology constitute a promising perspective, we have two questions. First, does it more than merely reflect the loss of power of the Church and will self-abasement give empowering inspiration to those who are now being marginalized in society? Second, is the kenotic perspective capable of rephrasing the fundamental tenets of Christianity (God, creation, pneumatology, evil, ...) or is it, with its focus on social relations, rather a supplement?

Service Through a Fitting Religious Offer

Cortina deals with the serving Church in the public sphere – and, by extension, in other areas of social and individual life. Jonkers and Barbieri reflect on two preconditions – the move to wisdom

and to kenotic ethics and theology – that would allow the Church to remain a serving Church in our time. In our view, there is still another dimension that one should not overlook when talking about a serving Church, namely the religious offer properly speaking. Being in possession of a fitting offer and being able to convey it to a large number of people is no longer self-evident.

As a consequence of the power reversal in day-to-day reality from clergy to laity and of the easiness of the exit-option, every religious institution or group, even a once mighty one like the Catholic Church, now has to count on the attractiveness of its religious offer.¹ However, the Catholic Church is failing in just this respect. This is the main direct cause of its decline. Between 1800 and 1960, an extensive and widely used offer for the regular faithful was present. Sacraments and sacramentals, daily prayers, fasting, devotional sodalities, dedication to a saint to which one felt particularly connected, the yearly celebration of the great religious feasts as markers of the calendar, the wide-ranging field of social and cultural associations, educational opportunities, even the religious decoration of the home were all regarded as being delivered or made possible by the Church. Many of these forms have now disappeared or they have lost their appeal for most Catholics. Practicing Catholics nowadays are mostly satisfied with a standard offer comprising the Eucharist and the ‘rites de passage’. That is not enough. If the Church wants to remain a serving Church, its biggest challenge is to build up a new and diverse religious offer, in line with the Catholic tradition, that is relevant for the individual person to help live his or her life and to reach for God. Elaborating such a new, fitting religious offer is a huge task. It is, above all, a creative task and one that cannot be promulgated from on high because it has to build upon countless experiments, mostly from below, from which a small number of successful performances can be selected for fine-tuning and wider

¹ Parts of what follows are adapted from Staf HELLEMANS, “Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers,” Staf HELLEMANS & Peter JONKERS (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*. Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015, pp. 153-154.

dissemination. To be fair, there has been widespread innovation, even after the waves of innovation of the 1960s withered away (World Youth Days, new *movimenti*, spirituality centers, church tourism etc.), but this has not been enough and what has been created has, in most cases, elicited limited appeal.

In order to show what is at stake here, we give two examples. The first is the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella. Before 1980, the zest for the *Camino* was drying up already for several decades. Yet, since the mid-1980s, the number of pilgrims travelling at least the last 100 kilometers on foot (or the last 200 kilometers by bike) – and who cared about getting a certificate – has exploded. From 2,491 certificates in 1986, it went up to 74,614 in 2003 and to 237,886 in 2014.² Many of these pilgrims have no or only a faint relationship with the Catholic Church. They walk the *Camino* in search of meaning and of personal healing or growth. Yet it is important that the Catholic Church continues to invest in the infrastructure of the *Camino*, to offer religion both in a specific Catholic and in a wider sense.

Where the *Camino* is an example of an old religious infrastructure that is used in new ways, the second relates to old spirituality. Many old orders and some newer congregations are refashioning their religious spirituality in view of a wider public of lay people. A case in point is the Ignatian spirituality of the Jesuits.

Ignatian spirituality seeks to help people to develop an appreciation of how God is at work in all things. By means of *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, men and women are accompanied through a series of exercises that help them to grow in attentiveness to the presence and activity of God in their everyday lives and thus to discern how they are being invited to live well and fully, serving both God and others. These exercises offer a practical way for people to discern their true path in life. In their traditional form, they were aimed principally at novice Jesuits and they were usually engaged in

² Ian READER, "Pilgrimage Growth in the Modern World: Meanings and Implications," *Religion* 37, 3 (2007), p. 211 and, for 2014, cf. <https://goo.gl/avEbq6>.

under the wise guidance of a competent spiritual companion over a period of thirty days of intense prayer, in a setting such as a retreat-house or monastery. In recent times, however, more and more lay people, including Protestants and marginal Catholics, are taking part. Accordingly, there has been widespread development of a method of giving the *Exercises* that was also envisaged by St. Ignatius. This method involves undertaking them while remaining in the activities of one's everyday life, over a period of several months marked by daily prayer of some sixty to ninety minutes and by weekly conversations with a competent spiritual companion. All over the world, this form of doing the *Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life* has become increasingly popular, thus enabling laypeople to derive benefit from a tradition in spirituality that is nourishing and fruitful for living a Christian life at the heart of the world.

The Catholic religious offer has always been quite variegated. If the Church wants to be of service to people and the world, it must try to guarantee a broad offer for all. The elaboration of a new offer, i.e., the creation of new or renewed spiritual and devotional paths that are supportive for living a fulfilled life, for the more intensely interested as well as for the lukewarm, is thus of critical importance. Renewing the Church concerns not only inner-church renewal or commitment to social and public causes, it requires no less a renewal of the religious offer.